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Intelligence Gathering: Insiders Meet on the Outside

By Jean M. White

If it had been the usual shop talk and reminiscence-swapping among conventioneers, each overheard conversation should have been worth at least one plot idea for a thriller novel.

There in the corridors and meeting rooms of the Sheraton Inn and Conference Center in Reston, more than 200 members of the Association of Retired Intelligence Officers were holding their second annual convention without cloak, dagger or cover.

Each wore a boldly lettered name tag. They welcomed interviews, held open sessions under the lights of TV cameras, and worried in public sessions about problems such as "good secrets, no-secrets and bad secrets."

But as for any idea for a thriller... the only slip came from Helen Priest Deck, former intelligence analyst, who has an epilogue and one chapter for a novel she is working on in retirement in Sudbury, Mass.: "What a story must be behind that Carlos who kidnapped the OPEC ministers..." She stopped in mid-sentence, not the former agent, but the writer protecting an idea.

"No one would expect ex-spooks and spies—we really like to consider ourselves intelligence officers—to meet in a convention like this," observed David Atlee Phillips, who was the founder of the association. It was organized two years ago, against the background of disclosures of abuses in intelligence operations by former agents who wanted to show that they were not burned-out cases of conscience but responsible people doing responsible jobs for their country.

"I realized that we had a public relations problem of some magnitude," said Phillips with wry understatement. "So we needed a public relations program of some magnitude."

"The whole mood has changed from last year," observed Hayden Estey, who once was a newspaper man before he joined the Central Intelligence Agency for a 23-year stint. "We don't have the intensity—that urgency to save a nation—of last year. It's not as lonely as it was a year ago."

"It has changed," Phillips agreed. "We're having a golf tournament this

year. Last year I couldn't have kept my eye on the ball, too nervous."

As the plot turns, Phillips, a relaxed, slightly rumpled chap, blew one 20-year-old "cover" when he appeared as an ex-agent spokesman for ARIOS.

In 1956, Phillips was assigned by the CIA to Beirut under the cover of an American businessman. He moved into a flat in an apartment house shared by Dick Beeston, an English journalist, and his wife.

"Well, we went over to welcome the new couple," Beeston was reminiscing at one of the two-day conference sessions (he was covering for the London Daily Telegraph). "And my wife walked in the apartment, looked at the furniture, laughed, and said: 'Oh, I know what you are. You're a CIA man.' Dave is a former actor and he just laughed his way out of it. About a year ago we saw him on TV and my wife had been right."

It was left for Phillips to give a final twist to the story.

"I was sent over to go 'deep'—to play the role of a businessman, put the kids in school, get an apartment and establish my cover slowly. We needed furniture and I answered an advertisement in the newspaper. I bought the furniture from a man who had been on a CIA assignment, but I didn't know that. I was, in effect, buying government property."

When the Beestons left Beirut a year and a half later, Phillips still remembered Mrs. Beeston's words: "You know at first I thought you were one of those cover-boys—intelligence chaps."

The Association of Retired Intelligence Officers is really a misleading cover name, Phillips admits, and the organization has been thinking about changing it. It has more than 1,200 members, a quarter of them women. It draws its members from a broad range of skills in intelligence-gathering and analysis—the scholars, analysts, technicians and researchers who stand behind the romantic spy figure.

Some may have been with the agency a few years, others are veterans of 20 to 30 years in operations both at home and in the field. But quite a few do not fit the picture of the usual out-to-pasture retiree. Some are in business and others in academia. "What a waste of talent. Just think what they could do in a career of crime," one observer said.

ARIOS has a speaker's bureau and has former agents available to address organizations from Rotary Clubs to garden clubs and for TV or radio interviews. "You have to reverse the whole pattern of your life. Intelligence people by nature are loners, taught not to talk," observed Lawrence Sule, who left the CIA about a year ago after more than 23 years and posts in the Far East, Latin America and Europe.

"I know I used to go to a party and if I heard that a reporter from News-

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